

For pleasure and enlightenment

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Oppositional mentalities

Intellectuals, protest and the Left

Martin Ryle

The “oppositional” mentality of the British Left’, wrote E.P. Thompson in 1965, ‘is certainly a limiting outlook; but it has grown up simply because our Left has had so bloody much to *oppose* ... The British Left ... has been immersed in ineluctable political contexts characteristic of the metropolitan imperialist power.’ Since 1960 it has been in protests against the compliance of governments in US/NATO military strategies that the British Left has seemed most vital. It has been able at such times to mobilize tens of thousands of ordinarily quiescent citizens, to bring together socialists in and beyond the labour movement, and to subject the Labour Party’s centre-right leadership to its most testing challenges. The pan-European mobilization against the deployment of new nuclear missiles in the early 1980s (in which Thompson played a crucial part) marked this Left’s moment of greatest dynamism. Protests against New Labour’s support for military action in the Gulf, Kosovo/Serbia, Afghanistan and Iraq have continued to draw together radical opponents of New Labour, and it is tempting for those involved to see this as a movement within which Left politics might reinvent itself.

Protest coalitions, however, are in principle united only by what they oppose. Demonstrating against the US-led attack on Afghanistan and against the likely future extension of the ‘war against terror’, I have been very conscious of this political limitation. The Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament, which has played an important organizing role, unites a spectrum of Left-liberal opinion that straddles the borders of the Labour Party, but has been unable to create a new party with a broader Left agenda. The alliance between CND and the national Stop the War Coalition (where the Socialist Workers’ Party has been the leading influence) indicates the range of positions within antiwar protest – from pacifism via radical ecology to those who would offer more or less qualified support to any state or organization that attacks or is attacked by the USA – and it signals the tactical choice to obscure these differences in the interests of a certain unity.

Protest can be said to have a wider dynamic, leading in ‘an anti-imperialist direction’ (the phrase appears in the concluding sentence of Andrew Chitty’s contribution to the *Radical Philosophy* discussion on 11 September and its aftermath, *RP* 111, p. 19). This is certainly where the ‘oppositional’ logic of the movement tends; and there is no doubt that we are likely to find ourselves opposing new US wars and British compliance in them. However, anti-imperialism is itself defined negatively, oppositionally. It may be construed as enjoining allegiances that many on the Left find untenable:

‘positive defence’ of the Taliban and Bin Laden, for example; or, in an earlier setting, the defence of Soviet-style socialism. The problem is not only with the particular allegiances proposed, but with the underlying Manichaeic world-view. Global capitalism/neo-imperialism is seen as so bad that anything opposed to it must be better, in a world where there are always and only two sides between which we must choose. To orient one’s politics around this belief is to repress some unpalatable truths. First of all, now as during the Cold War, the countries where ‘metropolitan imperialist power’ originated and whose military alliances defend the interests of capital are also countries whose citizens enjoy historically unprecedented political and civil freedoms, unknown in much of the world. For these freedoms the ‘enemies of freedom’, in the Politburo or the Taliban, have indeed shown no respect: which means that the choice between these opposed forces is a choice between different kinds of evil, to be rejected in itself. (Moreover, the opposition, if pursued as a military confrontation, can lead only to bloody US victories, perhaps eventually followed by cataclysmic ruin of the contending parties.) Second, the socialist alternatives that have been proposed have seemed less and less capable of winning support within liberal democracies, where capitalist priorities might still be challenged by political means.

In this context, the self-constitution of protest coalitions as broad alliances, agreeing to differ on underlying perspectives, is an agreement to evade the political question: what alternative do we envisage to the status quo? This applies not just to antiwar coalitions, but to protests against globalization or capitalism. The ‘anticapitalist movement’ is a welcome cultural sign of resistance, but politically it represents a regression from a time when substantive alternatives to free-market capitalism were being discussed and negotiated in Left social-democratic parties and governments. With the new social movements generally, the question is whether the different interests and perspectives involved can move from a relatively comfortable – but marginal, reactive and dependent – ‘protest identity’ to a ‘project identity’. This step would involve accommodation between very different aims and interests (those, say, of the automobile workers defending their jobs on the streets of Seattle, as well as those of the environmentalists demonstrating there against oil prospecting), but it is just here that a credible alternative politics must begin. As it is, one starts to sense an element of ritual in these repeated demos outside World Trade Organization or G8 meetings, which begin to look a bit like the old trek from Aldermaston. The antiwar coalition, too, has spent much energy exhorting people to attend demonstrations: there were four Hyde Park-to-Trafalgar Square marches in the six-month period to Easter 2002. Yet everyone knows these marches are not going to stop the war or topple ‘Bush and Blair’. Since the prospects of intervening effectively against British compliance in American war plans depend on whether the Left here can mount a long-term political challenge to the hegemony of New Labour, this is a moment when underlying questions need to be addressed rather than suppressed.

What is left?

To reflect on what might still define the Left in positive terms, and on the nature of an eventually counter-hegemonic politics, is one way of responding to Susan Buck-Morss’s suggestion that following last autumn’s terrorist attacks, intellectuals as ‘part of the thinking organ’ of the global body politic may need to speak in new ways (*RP* 111, p. 2). Sub- or counter-cultural movements provide engaged intellectuals with points of departure and networks of solidarity, and we still have a critical (‘oppositional’) intelligentsia. However, it is difficult to write with confidence of the wider progressive political project within which most of us want to locate our thinking. I do not mean just that the Left has been pushed to the margins; I mean that we no longer know, or agree on, what the Left is – in other than ‘oppositional’ terms.

Such reflection involves a return to old questions rather than an opening of radically new prospects. It drives one back to an assessment of the defeats, and unrealized openings, of the 1980s. That decade, which saw the apogee of an oppositional European Left in the antinuclear movement, also marked the eclipse of the forms in which socialist ideas in twentieth-century Europe had had their most effective incarnations. In Britain, the legitimacy of strike action as a means of asserting workers' interests was dealt a lasting blow with the defeat of the miners and subsequent Tory election victories. The apparatus of the Communist state began to collapse across the Soviet bloc: few wept at its demise, but many in the West were dismayed when no one tried to build in the ruins a post-Communist alternative, democratic but still socialist. The Labour Party began a mutation, paralleled elsewhere in Europe, which would allow its leaders to jettison much of the language and almost all of the mildly interventionist, mildly egalitarian economic policies that used to distinguish the parliamentary Left. Meanwhile, new social constituencies and new global themes (questions of gender and patriarchy; of 'race', migration and citizenship; of ecology, sustainability and the inequalities between First and Third World workers) underlined the limitations of European social-democratic programmes. This foreshadowed the possibility of conceiving socialism differently, as a 'politics of need'. However, it was evident that such a politics would conflict with many inherited priorities of social democracy's traditional, but in fact rapidly dissolving, social base.

In his contribution to a collection of essays published in 1981 (Martin Jacques and Francis Mulhern, eds, *The Forward March of Labour Halted?*), Raymond Williams acknowledged these latter pressures and questioned, more generally, whether the labour movement might still in good faith make its historic claim to represent the general interest. He objected to the figure of the 'forward march of labour' as obscuring the fact that the Left faced not an obstacle in its foreordained path but a crisis in its historical direction. Today, socialism as Thompson or Williams understood it is at the outer margins of political power in European societies. Some would add that the political and cultural efficacy of the socialist idea (conceived in its broadest terms, as the idea of an equal society in which collective political decisions would have priority over the mechanisms of the market) has been terminated also.

This is familiar. The difficulty is to distinguish, in responding, between long-term historical changes and conjunctural shifts. The drawing of such distinctions is itself a statement of one's political judgement and position. Let me set out schematically my own response. The revolutionary Marxist tradition, in European liberal democracies, is dead and should be decently buried. But the rightward swing of social-democratic parties, in line with their leaders' sense of how best to adjust to economic circumstances, can be resisted. It is politically possible, on the basis of eco-social democratic interventions (within a still operating capitalism, but with an explicitly counter-systemic orientation), to create the social, cultural and intellectual basis for an eventually post-capitalist economy.

This judgement reflects the now generally forgotten arguments of those thinkers (Williams, or Lucio Magri, or Laclau and Mouffe, for instance) who during the fluid,



activist moment of the 1980s sought in various registers to renew rather than abandon the ideals of democratic socialism.¹ I see there – much more convincingly than in Hardt and Negri's *Empire*, whose enthusiastic reception by some influential intellectuals on the Left I find difficult to understand – an attempt to combine argument about the content of a renewed socialist project with argument about which kinds of agency, or collectivity, might promote it. Some may see my reference to the socialist humanism of Williams and Thompson, and more generally to the activism of the 1980s, as a desperate turn to the past. But 1980 is not so remote as 1917. If we date the history of the socialist idea from the mid-nineteenth century, and accept that the end of the Cold War marked a critical alteration in its prospects, then the dozen years since the fall of the Berlin Wall may be regarded as a phase of readjustment and need not be seen as the end of the story.

I am arguing, in a word, that while the end of the Cold War need not and should not be seen as sealing the triumph of capitalism over socialism, it can and should be seen as marking the moment where pluralist, social-democratic politics sealed a historical victory over all the varieties of communism. A Left intelligentsia in the West which tended to identify itself by its rejection of social democracy has therefore to come to terms with a series of political truths, including the following:

1. The notion that the socialist future is inscribed in history, as the necessary consequence of the necessary collapse of capitalism, has been worse than unhelpful.
2. The 'subject of history' or 'revolutionary subject' cannot be conceived in terms of a single class with a set of non-contradictory needs.
3. The economic project of socialism cannot be understood as the fuller satisfaction of the material needs, in their existing forms, of affluent workers (or, of course, of well-to-do professionals) in the West.
4. The notion of a single defining moment of revolutionary transformation followed by the once-for-all installation of socialist government is untenable: on democratic grounds, since any socialist society would continue to be subject to conflicts of interest and value requiring political representation; and because the complex material–social basis of contemporary life, including the division of labour which underlies both production and administration, cannot be 'overthrown', it can only be changed.

Some will say that anyone who argues such views has abandoned socialism. I suggested earlier that it was difficult to know what kind of agreement there might be as to what socialism constitutes now, and my uncertainty concerns exactly this question. Do most intellectuals who still regard themselves as socialists mean by this that their allegiance is to some such revolutionary politics?

In my own view, socialism does not involve adherence to those conceptions of the agency, means and nature of political change. Nothing that has happened in the twentieth century need lead us to reject what I take to be the fundamental idea of socialism: that it is possible, and necessary, to find democratic means of controlling economic activity, and of directing this towards the meeting of collectively agreed needs. On the contrary, indeed. One old slogan seems as persuasive as ever: socialism or barbarism.

As Williams saw, the absolutely central question for socialism concerned the readiness of the movement to become no longer the agent of an existing historically defined set of material interests, but the movement within which 'the concept of a practical and possible general interest, which really does include all reasonable particular interests, and necessarily on a much wider than British scale, has to be negotiated, found, agreed, constructed'. The Labour Party in the mid-1980s shunned the electoral risks of engaging with the new social movements and of the internationalist and environmental sensibility which these sought to express. Its leadership since 1997 (almost wholly unopposed by its parliamentarians) has acknowledged such questions only in 'aspirational' rhetoric:

not without cultural-political significance, but complemented in practice by undeviating commitment to the status quo. Generally, and very strikingly, New Labour is the agent precisely of a reversal of social democracy's historical project, and seeks with missionary zeal to extend the sphere within which a politics of collectively articulated needs and values must yield to the market. However, the unacceptability of this project to both the labour movement and the environmental and internationalist constituency is more and more evident.

Nonetheless, we live for now under New Labour with what Kate Soper has called 'a politics of the suppression of the politics of needs'. What we are suppressing includes the unmet needs of the poor; anyone's need for anything that conflicts with the one-dimensional 'culture' of productivism; and the knowledge that the First World structure of consumption is unsustainable as a basis for humanity's future needs. Suppression is suppression: there are many indications that we are aware of what we deny. But these have been largely inchoate and sub-political. To make them explicit defines the starting point, intellectually and ideologically, for what socialism might still be.

Allegiance to this perspective is for the moment allegiance to an idea, although it certainly does not rule out, and in fact depends on and expresses, solidarities with particular social groups. It is, more precisely, allegiance to an intellectual and cultural project. The idea of 'a practical and possible general interest' remains to be more fully developed, and to be mobilized in the development of new political forces. I judge that these now ought to include an electoral alliance or party that would bring together progressive social democrats who are separately and variously powerless in their present organizations: Greens, dissident members of New Labour and the Liberal Democrats, unaffiliated radicals. Left intellectuals can contribute to the necessary political argument and organization, in a time whose dangers require us to move beyond the familiar responses of the 'oppositional mentality'.

Notes

1. For a sense of the range and quality of the debate, see Rudolf Bahro, *Socialism and Survival*, Heretic Books, London, 1982, and *From Red to Green : Interviews with New Left Review*, Verso, London, 1984; André Gorz, *Farewell to the Working Class*, Pluto, London, 1982, and *Paths to Paradise*, Pluto, London, 1985; Alec Nove, *The Economics of Feasible Socialism*, Allen & Unwin, London, 1983; Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, Verso, London, 1985; *Exterminism and Cold War*, Verso, London, 1982; Martin Ryle, *Ecology and Socialism*, Radius, London, 1988; Kate Soper, *Troubled Pleasures: Writings on Politics, Gender and Hedonism*, London, Verso, 1990.

